

Laura West traces the acting career of Michael Keaton, star of *Beetlejuice*, whose philosophy in life is that if you follow your instincts and live right, you can't help but succeed.

THE GHOST WITH THE MOST

The only genuine comics to emerge in films this decade burst onto the scene in 1984 - Eddie Murphy in *48 HRS* and Michael Keaton in *Night Shift*.

Both men stole their films from their ostensible stars, Nick Nolte and Henry Winkler.

Murphy was that rare commodity, an actor who could make racial comedy that offended neither black nor white. He gave an extra dimension to an otherwise ordinary cops-and-robbers drama.

In the same way, Keaton's ability to make manic stupidity appealing turned *Night Shift* from a wimpy love story into a lively comedy as with his latest, *Beetlejuice*, a film which might otherwise have been just a totally ridiculous re-working of the old haunted house story were it not for his comic off-the-wall lunacy.

Singlehandedly, Keaton made the far-fetched premise of *Night Shift* - that a pair of morgue attendants would use the facilities to run a call-girl service - seem logical. His character, Bill Blazejowski, is a motor-mouthed, grown-up, hyperactive kid who shouts a never ending stream of bright ideas into a Walkman.

Keaton himself believes he has much in common with Blaze. He served a long apprenticeship in showbiz and at 31, when he made *Night Shift*, he knew how to handle overnight success.

"If you trust yourself, you know how to handle yourself," he told me recently. He explained that he has always run on instinct and though he never performed on stage at school, he was always aware of his flair for comedy and would one day earn a living by making people laugh. Keaton readily admits that his move into showbusiness is remarkably like the script of *Cocktail*.

After dropping out of University, he scraped together every cent he had and made his way to Los Angeles where he got a job as a bartender. He spent two and a half years trying unsuccessfully to break into acting by day while at night he was the star behind the bar at a place Keaton says was known for its elaborate blender drinks.

His act at first revolved around the tricks he did with the bottles but eventually he was able to add a little comedy to his popular routine.

He began to work the comedy clubs in the mid seventies and it was during an early sojourn in Los Angeles that he



traded his given name, Michael Douglas, for another since Kirk Douglas' son had already signed up for that name.

"I was asked to sign a contract in my agent's office but was told that I couldn't sign my own name. I leafed through this book of actor's names till I came to Buster Keaton. Keaton sounded clean and easy to say, and everybody was saying, 'Come on, come on', so I became Michael Keaton."

He is convinced he won the part of Bill in *Night Shift* because he made it quite clear to director Ron Howard at the audition that, if he was chosen for it, what he would do to the character could be construed as hot-dogging. "I don't want Henry Winkler to feel bad," he explained, "but I'm not going to hold back. I'm going to do my job."

In his next film, *Mr Mom*, Keaton played a redundant junior executive whose wife (Teri Garr) becomes the breadwinner. The film did well and Keaton's career seemed to be heading skyward.

Unfortunately, his next couple of film projects didn't quite work out the way he and his growing band of admirers would have liked. The powers that be cast him in a string of good roles, but unfortunately they were just ordinary

people, not the sharp witted, breezy characters he plays so well.

In 1988, that all changed when he leaped out of the screen as a dead person with disgusting personal habits and a nasty array of scare tactics playing 'the ghost with the most', Betelgeuse, in the film of the same name (the film's name is spelt *Beetlejuice*).

It was the Michael Keaton of old who emerged as the self-styled 'afterlife's leading bio-exorcist', a ghost mistakenly called upon by a young couple who are searching for a way to frighten a weird family from their house.

The film, which among other things is an extravaganza of special effects, denies categorisation and, like Keaton's character, is visually exciting, absurdly wacky, completely off-centre and totally insane.

"It's best described as a reverse exorcism story," explained Keaton. "In most ghost stories, people try and get rid of ghosts. Betelgeuse has the job of getting people out of dwellings. We have a lot of fun and you'll probably laugh, which makes a change, because it's not often you can find very much about death to laugh at."

It is around Keaton's manic, off-the-wall

appearances that the film revolves. He is totally at home in the role, his sense of the absurd finely tuned and let loose in what is without question his best film performance yet - and that is saying something from a reviewer who ranks *Night Shift* among her all-time favourite comedies.

Conscious that he is again back up there at the top, Keaton remained philosophical about all the praise which is again being heaped upon him and has maintained his complete faith in his instinct for self-expression.

"The reality of it is, people get hot. I've made mistakes and I've got a lot of mistakes to make yet in my life, but I know this: if you're good, you'll be around for a while. You don't have to worry, 'Oh, will it last?'. All you have to do is follow your instincts and if you live your life right, your instincts will always be good."

MICHAEL KEATON ON VIDEO

1982	<i>Night Shift</i>	Warner
1983	<i>Mr Mom</i>	Roadshow
1984	<i>Touch And Go</i>	7 Keys
1985	<i>Johnny Dangerously</i>	CBS/Fox
1986	<i>Working Class Man</i>	CIC-Taft
1987	<i>The Squeeze</i>	CBS/Fox
1988	<i>Beetlejuice</i>	Warner